

## Safe, Secure Israel Can Stabilize Region

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By JOE WILSON

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My trip, sponsored by the American Israel Education Foundation, reached every region of the country - from the Golan Heights of the north to the Gaza Strip in the south; from Jerusalem in the east and Tel Aviv to the west. It was a responsible and necessary goal of ours to see the different issues that face each part of Israel and visit those areas damaged by recent violence.

The most dynamic change I noticed from my previous visit was the level of personal security on the streets and highways. In 2003, it seemed suicide bombers were a daily threat. Today, things are different but certainly not perfect. In fact, during our visit, the normalcy of everyday life was tragically interrupted by a murderous terrorist in Jerusalem who drove a bulldozer into cars and buses containing women and children. I was impressed that the people of Israel did not panic, but instead continued to gather at bus stops and on street corners. One has to admire a people who are not oblivious to the terrorist threat, but who refuse to have it undermine their everyday lives.

One component of Israel's successful internal security has been a physical security barrier. No longer can terrorists easily walk a short distance from the West Bank into Jerusalem to attack. The barrier aids the Israeli military in slowing down and capturing attempted terrorists. The improved stability for Israel and the West Bank shows that a fence does promote good neighbors. Five years ago, the holy sites of Christianity, Judaism and Islam were virtually deserted. Today, tour buses are competing for parking spaces.

In the broader sense, it is important to note that some of the security we have seen returned to Israel is due to the fact that no one has filled the role of former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein in supporting terrorism against Israelis. During Saddam's tyrannical rule, he provided \$50,000 rewards to families of suicide bombers who executed mass murder against Israelis. Today, America and its allies are working to ensure Iraq does not become an exporter of terrorism ever again.

Despite the enormous improvement we saw in security, there are obvious obstacles to complete peace and prosperity for Israel and the Middle East.

Our visit to the north revealed the threat that still emanates from Hezbollah's control of southern Lebanon. It was a poignant moment when we saw the flag of that terrorist organization flying over an outpost on the border. Since the 2006 war, Iran has reinforced Hezbollah with thousands of lethal and advanced rockets. While we were there, the Israeli peace process led to an agreement on a prisoner exchange, but this may only serve to embolden the terrorists more by being misinterpreted as Israeli weakness.

A year ago, Hamas terrorists seized control of Gaza in the south, fracturing the Palestinian Authority. Daily rocket attacks using Iranian-provided armaments murdered innocent civilians. Egypt has brokered a partial cease-fire, but these attacks and the continued support of the Iranian regime for violence against Israel are troubling.

Indeed, all of the threats are dwarfed by the heinous statements of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who has called for the destruction of Israel and the Jewish people. His statement that Israel "must be wiped off the map" is reinforced by the development of a nuclear weapons program in defiance of U.N. resolutions and by providing rockets and training for terrorists. The most logical use of the intercontinental ballistic missiles Iran is developing is for a nuclear warhead. Iranian missiles can reach Europe as they advance toward ultimately being able to reach the East Coast of the United States.

Despite extraordinary challenges, I remain optimistic for the long-term existence of Israel. A prosperous, strong, democratic Israel will be helpful to its Islamic neighbors by encouraging regional development and cooperation. Its seven million residents have built an economy of more than \$100 billion annually, which is larger than that of their four neighbors combined, which have a population well over 100 million people. It is this prosperity that can help support increased security. The United States should continue to stand with our democratic ally Israel for the sake of regional stability and economic growth.